

The ‘not yet competent’ student: Exploring narratives of failure

Graeme Simpson¹ and Ani Murr¹

Abstract: The Social Work Reform Board emphasises the need for robust assessment processes and qualified practice educators. Following our analysis of ‘failing – or ‘not yet competent’ students’ - we argue that most students ‘failed’ for reasons other than incompetent practice, which we outline.

We conclude by arguing for a robust construction of practice education/assessment, which emphasises doing ‘practice’ in the agency; a return to the notion of a portfolio as a vehicle for assessment, as opposed to the portfolio becoming the assessment; and a greater emphasis upon the practice educator to assess ‘practice, as opposed to shifting the assessment decision to portfolio reading or practice assessment panels. Our discussion will contribute to preparations for assessing capability within the new social work degree, and poses challenges to Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) and all involved in social work education.

Keywords: narratives of failure; not yet competent; portfolios,; holistic assessment; capability

1. Senior Lecturer in Social Work, University of Wolverhampton

Address for correspondence: School of Health and Well Being, University of Wolverhampton, City Campus North, Wolverhampton WV1 1AD.
g.simpson@wlv.ac.uk

Date of first (online) publication: 24th May 2013

Background

Opportunities for social work practice learning and assessment in the United Kingdom (UK) have, during the past decade, been the focus of attention for a range of social, political and historical reasons.

In 2002, the qualifying award for social work in the UK was raised from diploma level minimum to an Honours Degree minimum, although there had always been Masters' level programmes, which continued. Department of Health Requirements for the Degree in Social Work placed practice learning at the heart of social work education and training, stating that academic learning should support practice (DH, 2002). This emphasis is enacted in many HEIs with practice learning modules carrying academic credits.

The passing or failing of a student social worker is a political act because of the powers and privileges conferred by society on people attaining professional status (Evans, 1999; Parker, 2010). Despite the centrality given to practice learning in the degree, the increased number of days required in practice settings, and the prescription for partnerships between HEIs and social work employers, the employers noted that many of the first wave of graduates were not able to undertake basic social work tasks (DSCF, 2009).

These concerns were expressed following the death of Peter Connolly in 2007, and led to a review of social work practice and education, through the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB) and also the Munro Review into child protection (2011). These reviews have resulted in a range of recommendations, including improving social work students' experience of practice learning and assessment (DSCF, 2009), the training of those who oversee and assess practice learning, and the quality assurance of practice learning (DE, 2010).

This is the socio-political context in which we began to examine 'failing students'. Parker (2010) identified the limited literature on the subject of placement failure, termination and disruption. Available studies have considered assessment processes from the perspectives of a range of those involved generally (Crisp et al., 2006; Burgess et al., 1998), practice educators specifically (Moriarty et al., 2010; Waterhouse et al., 2011; Schumann and Barraclough, 2000), and occasionally students (Parker, 2010).

Our study examines the narratives of 'not yet competent students' within the context of an HEI administrative system for managing assessment, in which we consider practice assessment as a set of social practices between divergent stakeholders. The study focussed on summative assessments

within qualifying award programmes, but our experience of post-qualifying awards suggests the findings have a wider application.

The portfolio and the assessment process

(*A note on terminology:* The practice educator is the person who oversees and assesses the student's practice learning. 'Failing' covers both refer grades that require a re-sit by the student, and outright failure which does not offer the student opportunity to re-sit. Throughout we are discussing students failing practice learning modules which are credit bearing within qualifying social work programmes.)

To begin, we have outlined the process by which practice is assessed in the HEI studied. This process is typical of English practice assessment. In the English context, a practice educator is a social worker who has undertaken a course to develop skills of educating in practice, and a placement supervisor is the person in the agency who allocates work and oversees the daily work of the student, and as such may or may not be a qualified social worker. Often placement supervisors are working towards a practice education qualification. Placements in England are highly regulated and extensive quality assurance processes are in place to ensure they meet certain standards. They are designed to offer 'learning opportunities' to students to develop wide ranging social work skills, even though many placements would not necessarily employ qualified social workers and be referred to as 'social care' settings, although paradoxically these very same settings are likely to employ 'social workers' in other countries (see Lawrence et al., 2009).

The student produces a practice portfolio in which they present evidence of competence. This in itself is not unproblematic. Whilst evidence may be considered to be something 'factual', Parker (2010) draws attention to its circumstantial nature and the requirement for it to be interpreted.

The practice portfolio is loosely structured into three sections. The portfolio begins with a section termed 'regulation and compliance'. This includes General Social Care Council compliance documents, and the student's practice learning agreement, which attempts to be regulatory (demonstrating adherence to requirements), procedural (confirming roles of significant stakeholders) and pedagogic (as it purports to structure and enable the students' progress through the practice curriculum on placement). The latter purpose is considered within social work education

texts (Parker, 2010; Beverley and Worsley, 2007) but the implications for learning created by the tensions between requiring compliance whilst fostering autonomous development are, perhaps, under-explored.

In the second section the student produces their 'evidence' of competence; written accounts, reflections, direct observations, witness statements, feedback from formative assessments. This section is underpinned by aspirations for portfolios as a method of assessment, that they offer a direct voice to the learner rather than the assessor and they enable a more rounded view of practice ability to be portrayed through a wide variety of media (Doel, Sawdon and Morrison, 2002).

The final 'assessment' section contains a grid where the student cites the location of their evidence of competence in meeting the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Social Work, the educator's report and their recommendation for the portfolio grade, based on direct experience of the student's practice (for example, direct observations, reading records and reports) and their interpretation of the portfolio evidence. In many cases, however, the practice educator is 'off-site' and has not seen the student in practice except for pre-planned direct observations of practice. Thus, the practice educator's assessment decision is informed by, and to an extent relies on, the views of a placement supervisor who routinely sees the student's practice, and who assesses one of the direct observations. The practical and psychological complications which can arise between student, off-site practice educator and on-site placement supervisor in assessment processes have long been acknowledged (Lawson, 1998).

The use of portfolios as a method for the assessment of social work practice is widespread throughout the UK. Since their inception, the definition of a portfolio as 'a method of aggregating and storing all the assessment material produced during the course of the placement' (Evans, 1999: 210) has shifted to become a method for *producing this evidence*. Practice portfolios are now more likely to include items specifically written to evidence competence rather than containing documents in which competence (or incompetence) is evident. This distinction, albeit subtle, presents a core dilemma about what is being assessed. It becomes unclear whether the student's *practice* or the student's *account of their practice* is the focus of assessment. This is compounded if the practice educator is not 'on-site' and has rarely seen the student in practice.

A more longstanding dilemma concerns whether 'good' (or 'good enough') social work can be assessed by competence based criteria (Yelloly and

Henkel, 1995; O'Hagan, 1996; Doel, Sawdon and Morrison, 2002; Knight and Page, 2007; Beverley and Worsley, 2007; Parker, 2010). This debate is not the main concern of this work, yet the polarised views it reveals touch at the political heart of those who assess practice, as it sets the parameters of the contested nature of the assumptions with which practice educators approach their role. Initially the potential benefits of competencies were identified as clarifying the assessment process for students about what was expected of them, through rigorousness assessment of outcomes (Cowburn, Nelson and Williams, 2000). Humphries (1997, p.650) was less optimistic:

The competence approach is reductionist – it assumes that competence is the sum of achieved competencies; it lacks the reflective knowledge and understanding which are different from separate skills; it discourages the innovation and creativity necessary to handle unforeseen problems; it reduces ethical and philosophical debate to simplistic and one-dimensional 'values'; and it encourages an instrumentalism in education through offering a supermarket of accumulated credits.

The contested nature of 'practice education' is thereby clear, and we suggest that the current dominance of 'the portfolio' as outlined earlier, *may* be a device for seeming clarity and 'objective' rigour, but at same time it is indeed the embodiment of Humphries' critique.

Method of enquiry

Hall and White (2005: 380) argue that 'narrative analysis focuses on one particular form of communication – storytelling, either written or in everyday conversation'. The interpretation of narratives turns on sequence and consequence in the way the storyteller chooses and structures events into stories and, because narrative is a study of interaction, how the story teller addresses the 'audience'. The analysis may also involve the way the audience responds (Riessman and Quinney, 2005)

Accordingly, we sought to identify the 'stories' which emanated from the portfolios at the standardisation stage, and cluster them around overarching narratives. We considered portfolios where a fail or refer grade had been recommended, though we acknowledge that there are also competing narratives of 'competent' students. There were twenty-one instances of

refer/fail grades (students may have 'failed for more than one reason) excluding those who were referred/failed for either suspected plagiarism or non-submission. Out of the many statements made, we selected those which in part appear to offer an exaggerated position, and by doing so illustrate the potentially polarised nature of the debates.

Four formal reasons for refer or fail grades were identified, evenly spread across the assessed portfolios: one or more of the academically marked portfolio items did not merit a pass grade; a portfolio item was missing; the evidence of competence grid was inadequately completed; units of NOS were not met. These 'official' reasons masked what we considered to be three broad categories for failure and the narratives or stories associated with them, to which we now turn.

Failing due to not observing administrative requirements

'You forgot to put it in ...'

The evidence provided was sufficient and it clearly demonstrated your competences in becoming a qualified social worker. Obviously you are aware that Portfolio Item (X) is missing and I support the decision of the Assessor [sic] to fail you.

The missing item referred to a copy of the GSCC Compliance Form (used to monitor whether the GSCC requirements for practice learning experiences are being met).

The regulation of practice learning has grown significantly over recent years, and although this may have resulted in improvements to the quality assurance of placements, it has created the need to demonstrate compliance with minimum required standards. At the HEI analysed students must include the regulatory documents (e.g. compliance document, health and safety checklists, insurance forms) in their portfolios. Their absence then, becomes grounds for failure. If a signature or other element of the required documents is missing, the item is deemed incomplete and thus a 'fail'.

This failure narrative is justified thus: if the student cannot adhere to the regulatory guidance for the submission of a portfolio, they are unlikely to possess the skills necessary to function in a bureaucratic system of welfare provision. The narrative calls on a 'common-sense' view of practice and offers it as an unchallengeable legitimisation for an assessment decision, determined by the presence or absence of documentation. Whether this

has any real bearing on the student's ability to practice is thereby removed from the discussion – though Husband's (1995) 'morally active practitioner' would challenge this arbitrary use of power. The dilemma is compounded, as the student is often dependent on someone else to produce a portfolio document. Another persons' 'oversight' then becomes grounds for failing the student. The approach seems to privilege the notion of tangible and measurable evidence, avoiding the murkier complexity of circumstantial evidence (Parker, 2010) which might need more nuanced interpretation. The arguments supporting this approach may be correct, but we would suggest that they are most certainly contested. Such a process has, however, become cemented in the assumptions of the assessment and forms part of what Hall (1987) would have identified as the programme's hegemonic authority and power structures.

Portfolio item (Y) is graded refer as it was submitted late.

The evidence grid submitted by the student is incomplete with ... [a number]... of 21 units not cited.

These refer to cases of students submitting assessed work late, or not including specified portfolio items in their portfolios.

Administrative systems for the submission of assessed work in most HEIs require a submission date.

For practice modules this is problematic: although a placement day, rather than a date, is set, late starts and student sickness create a need for tracking. Even where this is not the case, the setting of an arbitrary date becomes artificial – for example a 'better' practice source may occur but cannot be used. Such pragmatic considerations underline Humphries' claim that the process stifles creativity. Being cited as grounds for failure is extreme bureaucratic reductionism.

Whilst university tutors' narrative may be that 'formal administrative requirements not being met', and practice educators' narrative may be simply 'you forgot to put it in', the students' narrative of why they failed, might be, 'the practice educator forgot ...' or 'I handed a piece of work in late'. It is unlikely that their narrative would be, 'I failed in practice'.

Failing for academic or quasi academic reasons:

I cannot believe you let this student pass!

Sorry, I am a little surprised that the student has met all 21 units when there is clear evidence they have not

Do you know what you are doing ... ?

The evidence grid does not match up where the evidence is in the portfolio. Units 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, and 18 are all weak or no evidence to support them' 'Having sampled the 6 Key Roles I cannot see that the evidence you have supplied demonstrates your understanding of the units or that you have met the units

You may be able to practice, but you can't put a portfolio together ...

Several evidences are incorrect, absent or weak. The grid needs to be resubmitted as there is strong evidence in the portfolio for these units

The student's organisational skills and ability to put together a coherent portfolio has let [them] down again this year

The evidence grid is not completed in the required format so could not be checked by the Assessor

I do not disagree with the Assessor's indication of student's competence. However I do feel student should be graded an E4 (retrievable fail) and requested to submit 2 portfolio items with attention to Units (A) and (B)

You have failed the portfolio item...

A student failed for two refer submissions of a portfolio item. Although the practice educator had assessed *all* NOS units as met, the practice educator held that the academic criteria for one portfolio item was not met. Whilst in practice and supervision the item was evidenced, this had not transferred to the ability to write about practice to the required academic standard.

These students are failed, not because of what they have done in practice,

but rather how they have written about what they have done, or signposted the evidence of what they have done, within their portfolios. It is common that such 'failing' students have been viewed as competent in practice, but have been failed for not observing portfolio item requirements, or for selecting the so-called 'wrong' material to cite in their 'evidence grid'. 'Failure' can result, even when followed by the comment 'there is strong evidence in the portfolio for these units'.

As well as students failing for not adhering to portfolio guidance, there are instances where the outcome of the practice module is determined by the grading of a short (750 words) written piece. Practice educators who are full-time social work practitioners are often insufficiently trained in marking academic work, and Waterhouse et al. (2011) found that practice educators felt least confident and largely unsupported in academic marking. Practice educators who are full-time and independent are potentially more skilled and experienced in academic marking but are often involved in numerous HEIs' programmes each with differing portfolio requirements. This was recognised by Doel (2007) who found that a variety of practice education arrangements created confusion and inefficiency.

In the examples cited, the practice assessment decisions were not primarily about whether the students were or were not competent, as there was apparently nothing in the portfolio which warranted practice failure. Rather, the decisions turned on quasi-academic reasoning which can potentially fail the practice module. The legitimisation for this, again calling on unchallengeable common sense, is that if students cannot follow guidance or identify their strongest evidence of competence they are unlikely to function well in a profession dominated by procedures and protocols, which also requires the ability to base assessments on good evidence. This pragmatism may be well founded, but such 'assessment criteria' were not specified to students.

Whilst in these narratives there is a faint relationship to practice, it is important to note that 'quasi-academic' reasoning could mask a genuine practice reason for failure. Evidence which considers the emotional cost to practice educators of failing students (Finch, 2009), may explain their focus upon the more 'objective' element of failing a written portfolio item, which indeed may be of poor quality.

The core narrative for the student, however, would be one of 'I failed the portfolio' even where there might have been evidence of poor practice.

Failing for being 'unsuitable' (as distinct from 'not competent') or 'The suitability panel failed me'

A placement was terminated early due to a serious shortfall in the standards expected of a student at this level. The due process for the terminating of training (scrutiny by 'suitability' and fitness' panels) has concluded that the student is unfit for qualification as a social worker.

The narrative formed here is arguably as close to failing practice as we saw, yet significantly fell short of being explicit about it.

As previously noted, practice assessment is a political activity because it gate-keeps the entry to the profession. Assessing a student can be a highly legalistic process, which only becomes apparent when attempting to fail a student and ensuring that the entitlement to a fair hearing and equity is observed. This places the process of judging the student's performance outside academic conventions and practices for assessment and into quasi-legal hearings by suitability panels.

Where suitability panels are multi-professional (that is, including nursing, midwifery and social work professions) it is important to ensure that they are 'fit for purpose', through a shared understanding of each profession's regulatory values, principles and criteria.

Arguably it may be that by terminating placements in this way avoids the more contentious route of allowing a student to continue on placement and fail for being incompetent, protecting service-users and the agency in the process. Nonetheless, the constructed narrative is not about 'practice', but about a vaguer, more subjective construct of 'suitability', which in itself is contested there more it broadens to incorporate the regulation of private lives (McLaughlin, 2007). Here the student's story might not be 'I failed in practice', but rather, 'they said I wasn't suitable'.

In the study we did not find any student failing for being incompetent. Indeed, in our experience a student simply reaching the end of a placement and being found incompetent is rare. Thus, the story 'Your practice isn't good enough' or, from the students' perspective 'I failed my practice' is one which doesn't seem to be told.

Creating myths

Discussion of our initial findings led us to consider other potential narratives, which we have distinguished as ‘myths’. In this context a ‘myth’ is an unscientific story which carries ‘potential’ truths. A powerful myth is that of ‘it’s all down to luck’ given different practice educators’ approaches to assessment, which was summed up as:

It’s the luck of the draw because those students with ‘examiner’ style assessors will get retrievable fail grades whilst the assessors who are oriented to being advocates or advisers, find the evidence for students.

The process of practice education and assessment, not surprisingly, varies between educators and their respective styles. One educator’s view was:

If you can cite the evidence you’re competent, if you can’t you’re not.

This starkly reinforces the argument advanced in the earlier discussion, namely that it is the writing about practice which is assessed, rather than the doing. More significantly, the writing has become a substitute for the practice, to such a degree that the ‘doing’ is hidden from the process. This may be connected to the development of a stronger emphasis on academic standards and regulation, as one practice educator commented:

It’s all about misfits. The assessment of social work doesn’t fit into academic assessment conventions and the regulatory requirements don’t assist the ‘developmental’ functions in practice learning.

Thus, practice learning cannot be easily subsumed into a pre-existing academic framework and any attempt to do so will have negative consequences for both. A practice educator concluded:

It’s all a matter of power struggles in the board room, there are continuous arguments between parties with different vested interests (tutors, placement coordinators, practice educators, employer based training staff) who all claim to represent the interests of ‘practice’.

Discussion

Following the analysis of documents and the narratives which we identified, there are four key areas which need to be at the forefront of any subsequent consideration of practice assessment.

First, following directly from the previous comment, the *social practices* through which the assessment process is enacted are crucial to the assessment decision. We suggest that assessment decisions are constructed through these practices, as facts and opinions are inseparable from their presentation, including who presents them, to whom and where. The nature of the social relations, including power relations, between the parties to the assessment; the assumptions each brings about knowledge; and, the variable claims to legitimation are all played out in the assessment process (Torrance, 2000; Hall, Slembrouck and Sarangi, 2006)

Second, we suggest that the assessment process marks the tension between 'scientific enquiry' and 'professional judgement'. The 'scientific enquiry' approach underpins criterion-based assessment, and the reductionist nature of this approach and critiques of competency based assessment have been discussed earlier (Humphries, 1997). Knight and Page (2007) develop the critique of the scientific approach and its aim of establishing with some certainty, that the students have certain knowledge and skills and values, with which they perform professionally. They argue that the underpinning assumption that practice assessment can mirror a scientific enquiry is flawed and assert the view that professional social work practice involves the ability to deal with complexity of a nature which is not reducible to its constituent parts. Law (2004) suggests that, whilst those with sufficient technical know-how can solve some complex problems, there are other problems which increase in complexity when technical-rational approaches are brought to bear on them. Knight and Page (2007) argue that the competency approach to the assessment of social work practice brings, using Law's concept, a clarity which distorts. It distorts by moving the assessment of practice away from a decision made by an observing practice educator, to a decision made on the basis of 'evidence' of competence presented in a portfolio. Portfolios, then, do not provide opportunities for students to 'showcase' their practice but are vehicles in which they provide evidence of their claims to be competent. This can become reduced to an ability to demonstrate their competence at assembling a successful (or otherwise) portfolio.

Third, the question of how assessors are orientated to their task is

significant. Broadfoot, (1998), Tunstall (2001) and Morgan et al. (2002) suggest a range of positions adopted by assessors, which includes 'examiners' (using externally determined criteria), 'gatekeepers' (considering 'do I want this person as a professional colleague?'), 'advocates' (looking for every opportunity to find merit) and 'advisors' (actively looking for ways the student has met criteria). The myth of 'it's all down to luck' seems supported by wider evidence, since, in a practice learning module there can be as many assessors as there are students. For the vast majority of assessment decisions this does not appear to matter, but may become influential once a student's work has begun to be seen as marginal or failing. We do not know whether the particular orientations of practice educators lead to disproportionately more 'refer' grade recommendations. Nor do we know whether the different orientations can be associated with more 'accurate' (robust) assessment decisions and this requires more detailed investigation. When a student is considered to be failing the number of people involved in the assessment decision increases and can include placement supervisor, practice educator, tutor, second reader, members of the Practice Assessment Panel and potentially 'Suitability' and 'Fitness to Practice' panel members. Each person brings their own assumptions about their orientation to the assessment process, and may be unaware that others approach it differently. Each orientation is underpinned by differing governing principles and serves different purposes. This adds a level complexity to the decision making process which needs to be acknowledged and managed. The clarity of the decision may be lost in the power differentials at play, which determine whose opinion is brought to the foreground, whose is left in the background and whose remains unconsidered, sustaining the myth of the 'boardroom struggle' and underlining the wider political nature of assessment.

Finally, we draw attention to the competing discourses in education and social work. We have identified an education discourse which is concerned with regulating the process of assessing attainment. The social work discourse focuses upon assessment by someone already competent in the profession who has the intention to initiate, develop or change social work practices through involvement in social work education. Thus, the assessment of practice is a contested arena, as we identified earlier. The 'official voice' of professional regulating bodies promotes the explicit criteria of a performance model, whereas progressive educators (based in either practice or the classroom) choose to look at students' internal processes and development drawing upon a more humanistic rather than scientific

basis for understanding what makes a 'competent practitioner'.

The parties involved in assessing practice are not free from the influences of their own professional knowledge, experiences, orientations, and interests. They have their own 'narratives', each associated with different power relations and values, some of which clash and some of which relate harmoniously with those of other parties. A boardroom struggle to gain power and legitimacy ensues in the assessment of practice and what seems clear is that each programme will play out its own myths and narratives in the assessment of students against the dialectical tensions inherent in the disciplines of social work and education.

Conclusions

The students in this study received refer or fail grades because they did not fulfil a technical task of signposting educators to the best evidence or because a small element of the portfolio was deemed inadequate. It was not possible to ascertain whether this was due to the orientation of the educators assessing their portfolios, or whether practice educators who regard a student as incompetent find academic failure a more straightforward route to constructing the assessment decision. There remains much to explore in respect of the reasoning of practice failure.

A revised social work degree is being developed, and HEIs and their partner agencies will be developing practice modules based upon capability rather than competence. Our research indicates that there are key matters to be debated during these 'new' developments.

1. There has to be a much clearer understanding of the complexities, power dynamics and competing interests in the assessment of social work practice. To see it as a series of 'technical' difficulties to be overcome will not resolve these complexities, but rather hide them.
2. There needs to be overt discussion about the nature of practice education and practice assessment in the terms identified above and to indicate the type of orientations which are best suited to the development and assessment of social work practice.
3. There needs to be renewed focus upon the *practice of social work* in the assessment process, as opposed to the writing about it. This is not to diminish the importance of being able to write coherently, but it is to

argue that assessment of practice should be focused upon the 'doing' of social work.

We would suggest that these are important aspects to consider as HEIs develop the holistic assessment proposed as a feature of the PCF and of the SWRB recommendations in a move away from the 'tick box' approach to assessment. This shift represents, for us, a welcome culture change in how assessments will be carried out. Developmental work is being undertaken by The College of Social Work and the Higher Education Academy. There is a clear challenge here for HEIs and Practice Educators to develop fair and transparent assessments of students' practice learning, which are not only robust but which focus upon the 'doing' of social work. We would also draw upon the work of Biggs and Tang (2007), who suggest that what and how we assess influences what students learn; thus, bureaucratic, technical advice-dependent assessment processes create bureaucratic technical advice-dependent social workers. If we desire to educate social work practitioners who are critical thinkers to meet Munro's (2011) and the SWRB's demands, we should not ignore this as we move towards the goal of holistic assessment.

Our own position is clear, in that we are seeking to create the conditions in which practice educators can assess *practice* in a thorough and creative way, freed from unnecessary administrative and bureaucratic constraints. We anticipate difficulties but our hope is that whatever narratives of failure emerge in the future the one that will feature the most is 'the student was not a capable practitioner'. When that narrative dominates then perhaps the employers will agree that social work education is 'fit for purpose'.

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